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## **REPORT OF THE JOINT VISIT OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARDS OF UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-WOMEN AND WFP TO BANGKOK, THAILAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF THE UNION OF MYANMAR**

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Item 5 of the provisional agenda

Executive Board of WFP  
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3 to 6 June 2013, Rome  
Item 13 of the provisional agenda

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**Report of the joint visit of the Executive Boards of  
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-WOMEN and WFP to  
Bangkok, Thailand and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar**

## **I. Introduction**

1. A delegation of 23 members of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, WFP and UN-Women undertook a joint field visit to Bangkok, Thailand, and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar from 7 to 18 March 2013. The purpose of the visit was to enhance Executive Board members' understanding of the extent and ways in which United Nations organizations position their engagement with the country at this critical time in its transition, and contribute to the country in meeting its national priorities to attain sustainable development, achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and address challenges it faces. The delegation also reviewed the function and role of the Bangkok-based United Nations Regional Team in supporting United Nations country teams (UNCTs) and national governments throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The field visit gave the delegation the particular opportunity to learn about operational issues facing the United Nations development system,

particularly in relation to implementation of Resolution 67/226 on the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR).

2. Myanmar, a least developed country (LDC), was selected for the field visit due to the unique development and humanitarian opportunities and challenges facing the country amidst a period of rapid and substantial political, socio-economic and public-sector reform. The Government of Myanmar is making efforts to achieve the MDGs and to improve the lives of its people. The United Nations has an important role to play in providing coherent and effective support to the national Government in the realization of its priorities and objectives, across a variety of programmes and contexts – economic and social development, political reform, humanitarian relief and post-conflict peacebuilding.

3. The delegation first visited the Asia-Pacific regional headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand, where they met with the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) regional directors team, the regional thematic working group on gender equality and women's empowerment, and staff from regional offices of the six funds and programmes. In Myanmar, meetings were held with a range of government and parliamentary stakeholders, including the Vice-President, Senior Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Speakers of both Houses of Parliament, Parliamentarians, Chief Justices, and authorities at the state and township levels. The group also met with civil society, bilateral and multilateral development partners, the private sector and the UNCT, and visited respective United Nations country offices.

4. Site visits included a range of agency-specific and joint projects in Thanlyin Township (Yangon Region); Mandalay, Yezagyo, Nyaung-U and Pakokku Townships (central dry zone); Sittwe and Pauktaw Townships (Rakhine State); and Kalaw, Taunggyi, Nyaung Shwe and Hsiheng Townships (southern Shan State).

5. The representatives of the Executive Boards express their gratitude to the Government and the people of Myanmar for their hospitality and for the opportunity to learn from the unique situation of the country. Warm appreciation is also extended to the UNCT in Yangon, and the UNDG Regional Team in Bangkok, for organizing a comprehensive and well-prepared programme and for making all the necessary arrangements.

## **II. Development Context in Myanmar and the Asia-Pacific Region**

6. Myanmar is a country at a crossroads. Since the first elections in 20 years were held in 2010, the country has been undertaking a triple transition – political, economic and social – with rapid and wide-ranging reform initiatives under the administration of President Thein Sein. A major milestone in democratization in 2012 was the holding of parliamentary by-elections in April. As a result, the National League for Democracy (NLD) became the largest opposition party in Parliament, with Aung San Suu Kyi and 42 other NLD candidates being elected.

7. The economy continues to be liberalized, including through currency reform and the passage of a new foreign investment law, and in late 2012 the President announced a third stage of reforms with a commitment to good governance by improving public administration and combating corruption. Many nations removed their sanction regimes against Myanmar in 2012, and the country is looking towards an enhanced diplomatic and economic relationship with other nations, particularly its neighbours in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

8. By March 2013, the Government had reached ceasefires with 10 of the 11 non-state armed groups in the country. Conflict continued in Kachin State, however, and serious outbreaks of sectarian violence in Rakhine State had led to human rights violations and a major humanitarian crisis in that state. A Peacemaking Committee reporting to the President was established, supported by the new Myanmar Peace Centre.

9. Amid such a significantly changing political and economic landscape, Myanmar represents a unique and complex set of opportunities and challenges. The country has significant growth potential, with its rich variety of natural resources, a rich and diversified agricultural base, open access to sea, and a strategic geography between South and East Asia. On the other hand, this growth is uneven, with a significant rural–urban poverty gap and noticeable disparities in human development between the 14 states and regions, particularly those affected by conflict. Myanmar is also prone to natural disasters and vulnerable to the effects of climate change. There is an urgent need to address the lack of reliable data and statistics.

10. The Government is working to fulfill its commitment to the MDGs, as well as its obligations under international instruments including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Government has committed to reducing poverty from 26 percent to 16 percent by 2015 (although these figures may be inaccurate due to lack of data) and to graduating from LDC status by 2020. In January 2013, the Government, with the support of the United Nations, held the first Myanmar Development Cooperation Forum, which resulted in the Nay Pyi Taw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation.

11. Development actors working in Myanmar essentially face a whole spectrum of development situations representing very different challenges and requiring very different responses. Large cities like Yangon and Mandalay resemble a middle-income country context, with significant growth, while many rural areas better represent the country's LDC status and the need for enhanced productive capacities to overcome structural constraints. Select areas (particularly Rakhine and Kachin) remain characterized by substantial humanitarian needs, while a number of other states are just emerging from decades of conflict and require assistance in demobilization and peacebuilding. Likewise, areas across the country have extreme levels of poverty and require infrastructure development (particularly energy, water and sanitation), disaster risk reduction and development of human capital. This variety of contexts faced in Myanmar present a real challenge to the Government and to development actors such as the United Nations, and highlights the need for a wide range of strategic and targeted interventions at the national, state/regional and township levels.

12. The delegation also looked at the regional context in Asia and the Pacific, a region that is home to approximately 60 percent of the world's population. It is culturally, politically and economically diverse. Notwithstanding these diversities, there are some commonalities in challenges in the region.

13. Result-oriented analysis of critical issues as well as technical assistance and capacity-building have been provided to 62 Member States in the region by the largest Regional Commission of the United Nations, which is the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and United Nations regional agencies and funds. Moreover, within this Asia-Pacific region, there are a number of regional and sub-regional frameworks that forge cooperation – particularly economic cooperation – among Member States. This includes Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, ASEAN, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

### **III Observations and Lessons Learned about the Functioning of the United Nations Development System**

14. Considering the complex and changing development context in Myanmar and previous restrictions for some United Nations agency mandates, the delegation found that members of the UNCT were each working hard and making good progress in developing development programmes, building working relationships with the Government and other stakeholders, and delivering urgent humanitarian assistance. Just as the Government is going through a process of reform, the UNCT is currently in transition as it moves towards post-sanctions development and humanitarian operations in the country without restrictions, in full consultation with the Government, and in complement with development partners, many of which, like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, are only now recommencing programming in Myanmar.

15. The relationship of the United Nations with the Government is fast evolving, particularly following the removal of restrictions on UNDP's mandate by the Executive Board and the agreement of a normalized country programme in January 2013. United Nations activities appear to be well aligned with government priorities, and UNCT members are deepening their engagement with relevant national ministries and with government officials at the township and community levels. The state/regional level of government will become increasingly important as the decentralization process continues. The United Nations is also increasingly using government systems for service delivery, and the UNCT played a key role in supporting the Government to organize the first Myanmar Development Cooperation Forum in January 2013, bringing together a range of development partners to examine policy options and improve alignment with government priorities.

16. There is more work to be done, however, to ensure national government ownership of the United Nations programme of work. The UNCT does not use the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) in Myanmar – instead it has a Strategic Framework for the period 2012–2015, which was developed before many of the current national reforms were under way, and does not include buy-in from the Government. More work is required to enable the Government to identify the relative strengths and value of the United Nations system in supporting its development objectives, and to provide leadership to United Nations planning processes. Likewise, the United Nations needs to improve information-sharing and transparency with both national and sub-national government and parliament, as well as with the general public, in order to build legitimacy, ownership and a spirit of partnership.

17. The reforms that Myanmar has initiated have resulted in an increased inflow of official development assistance and a growing presence of donors, both bilateral and multilateral. This is welcomed but creates certain challenges, which must be addressed. The re-engagement of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank should supplement the United Nations system in essential areas. It also opens up for more focused development activities by the United Nations system as others can now step in. It also means that the United Nations system needs to adapt from a situation where the United Nations largely worked as the one and major donor to a situation with many and other large donors. Development partners expect that the United Nations system take advantage of its long presence in the country and take a key role in facilitating a Government-led and inclusive process of donor coordination. Plans to establish a more formal donor coordination structure, with both bilateral and multilateral actors under the framework of government ownership, are essential and need to be put in place promptly. This structure should also include non-traditional donors

and other stakeholders. The delegation heard from several donors that multi-donor trust funds are considered important mechanisms for aid delivery in Myanmar.

18. The United Nations has a particular role to play in enhancing South–South and triangular cooperation in Myanmar, particularly the sharing of knowledge, lessons and best practices from other countries in Asia and other regions. At this point, United Nations engagement in this area is limited, and more can be done to identify opportunities for such cooperation across all key areas of the national development agenda, and in support of sustainable development. The delegation welcomed the UNCT’s willingness to create a task force to identify promising South–South and triangular cooperation initiatives that could be presented to the Government of Myanmar, bearing in mind its national priorities.

19. Partnerships between the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups and the private sector are also developing as opportunities open up. The participation of NGOs in thematic working groups is welcomed, but there is a need to reach out proactively to other groups to facilitate increased dialogue, transparency and cooperation. Civil society organizations would benefit from United Nations support in capacity-building and joint advocacy. NGOs have a particular role to play in ensuring long- term sustainability of some of the community-level projects that the United Nations is now transitioning out of.

20. With the lifting of restrictions on the United Nations programme in Myanmar, there are also opportunities for the UNCT to increasingly use integrated and joint approaches, and to work towards greater coherence across agencies, including on prioritization and evaluation. The delegation welcomed the work by the UNCT to strengthen joint positioning, but noted that agencies are largely planning and implementing programmes on an individual basis. Silo approaches should be avoided. There is room for enhanced programme-level coordination in particular sectors and on cross-cutting issues, as well as strengthening complementarity in projects at the township or community level. Results reporting at the UNCT level is mainly focused on outputs and activities rather than outcomes, a situation that is not unique for Myanmar.

21. The Resident Coordinator (RC) function is of crucial importance in Myanmar’s complex and transitional development environment. The RC has a key role to play in promoting strategic policy dialogue with the Government and other development stakeholders, for ensuring coherence and overall strategic positioning of the UNCT and for guiding the implementation of the United Nations Strategic Framework. Important achievements of the RC and the UNCT in this regard include the preparation of a development policy options paper and the holding of an associated conference in 2012, support for the first Myanmar Development Cooperation Forum leading to the adoption of the groundbreaking Nay Pyi Taw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation and support for Myanmar’s first MDG Report since 2006.

22. The delegation found that the RC Office was well staffed relative to some other countries, including staff funded from bilateral donors. However, a lack of cost sharing from across UNCT members in Myanmar was cited as an impediment to strengthened UNCT coordination. The lack of flexible financing has potential negative consequences for common start-up/preparatory activities of the UNCT. One explanation provided was the absence of a global agreement among United Nations agencies on the future burden-sharing of the United Nations Development Operations Coordination Office/United Nations Country Coordination Fund, which is currently being negotiated.

23. The functional firewall between the RC/Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the UNDP Resident Representative functions, including clear division of labour and accountability lines, requires further strengthening. The recruitment of a UNDP Country Director in 2012 should enable the RC to focus on strategic

positioning of UNCT, and member organizations, limiting the UNDP Resident Representative role to overall guidance. The firewall dilemma again raises the problem of the absence of government accreditation and formal recognition of the RC/HC and the UNDP Country Director, respectively.

24. Due to the existence of the United Nations “Good Offices of the Secretary-General” in Myanmar, headed by the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General, the division of roles between the RC/HC and Special Adviser in addressing the Government was not always clear to the delegation.

25. Following meetings in Bangkok, the delegation agreed that the United Nations regional offices of the individual agencies and UNDG regional team have been playing an important role in the dissemination of international standards on policy formulation and project implementation, in order to serve the Asia-Pacific region with a view to addressing the region’s challenges and promoting its strengths. This includes: provision of technical expertise, which may not be available at the country level; support to the formulation of UNDAFs; performance appraisal of RCs and UNCTs; sharing of best practice between country teams; and developing strategic policy advice on region-wide issues such as operating in middle-income countries, urbanization and disaster risk reduction. The visit also highlighted the importance of United Nations cooperation with ASEAN, PIF and other regional organizations, and the possibilities for further United Nations support to South–South and triangular cooperation. Regional offices can also play a further key role in implementing region-wide programmes on policy commitments such as CEDAW, particularly in countries where they have limited or no presence.

26. The delegation was pleased to see the role of the Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Bangkok, which provided an example of how the Regional Commission and Regional UNDG were working together to ensure gender is addressed as a cross-cutting issue in inter-agency planning and programme implementation throughout the region. Key results achieved included enhanced strategic coherence on regional policies on violence against women and systematized knowledge-sharing.

## **IV Observations and Lessons Learned About United Nations Programming**

### **Inclusive Growth and Poverty Reduction**

27. Myanmar enjoys a favourable geographic location with an extensive coastline, fertile land and an abundance of natural resources. The country has significant agricultural potential and a productive working age population. Despite this, Myanmar is considerably less developed than its fast-growing neighbours, with an average of 5 percent economic growth and an estimated per capita income of US\$702. Poverty levels are currently high, at an estimated 26 percent of the population, and food poverty is around 5 percent. The National Strategy on Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation aims to reduce the poverty rate from 32 percent in 2005 to 16 percent by 2015. While there are signs that poverty is decreasing, there are large and widening regional inequalities, with poverty rates in rural areas twice as high as those in urban areas. Remote border areas, mainly populated by Myanmar’s minority ethnic groups, and areas emerging from conflict are particularly poor.

28. In meetings with delegation members, ministers and members of parliament stressed the importance of enabling accelerated economic growth and poverty reduction, and highlighted the Government’s nine priorities: agricultural production; livestock and fisheries; rural productivity and cottage industries; technical education; micro-saving and credit enterprises; rural cooperatives; rural socio-economy; rural energy; and environmental conservation. Several pointed to



agricultural development as particularly important. Currently, agriculture generates 43 percent of gross domestic product and 54 percent of employment in Myanmar. Agricultural productivity and growth is constrained, however, by a number of factors, including inadequate infrastructure, inappropriate investment in irrigation, inadequate technology dissemination and technical support to farmers, policy inconsistency and a lack of well-defined land tenure/occupancy/ownership rights. In this regard, government commitment to keep small and medium size farms as a priority is particularly acknowledged.

29. Under the United Nations Strategic Framework, the UNCT has set out to support Myanmar's national development priorities, policies, strategies, programmes and budget so that they are inclusive and growth-oriented, and address disparities and inequalities across and within regions and groups. Furthermore, the UNCT is focused on improving livelihoods, enterprise, employment opportunities and food and nutrition security of the most vulnerable in rural areas, as well as access to rural finance. The opportunities for the United Nations to support growth and poverty reduction in Myanmar are enormous; the challenge will be to focus the work in a sustainable way and according to comparative advantage. The United Nations has an extensive network in rural villages and townships, mostly as a result of the long-standing presence in the country of UNICEF and UNFPA and UNDP's Human Development Initiative, which provided crucial livelihood support at the grassroots level from 1993 to 2012. In line with a recent UNDP Executive Board decision, this approach will be partly phased out in order to focus more on strengthening local governance and the government's ability to enhance local service delivery. The delegation observed a number of self-reliance group projects under this initiative that were in the process of being phased out. This is promising, because it is important that the United Nations begin to move increasingly towards more upstream policy work with the Government at the national, sub-national and local levels, and that it hand over some of the community-level work to other actors. It is important, however, that this transition be well planned and sustainable, and that the United Nations focus on areas with the greatest need and relevance.

30. The majority of funding towards the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger is channeled through the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), which was established in 2009, and is managed by UNOPS. To date, LIFT has assisted 1.5 million people (more than 3 percent of Myanmar's population) and reached some of the poorest and most vulnerable rural families. Such modalities should continue to be reviewed, however, to ensure that they remain relevant and are adequate in supporting the Government's priority growth objectives through capacity-building. As the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank scale up their operations in Myanmar, it will be important that there is no duplication in key sectors, including microfinance.

### **Equitable Access to Quality Social Services**

31. Ensuring universal access to quality social services is recognized by the Myanmar UNCT as an essential condition for establishing an inclusive and equitable society. While official data show some improvements in education enrollment and life expectancy, there are still substantial challenges with regard to access to quality education, access and availability of health care services including reproductive health, and access to and proper use of water and sanitation. These challenges were unanimously conveyed to the delegation by government and non-government stakeholders. Despite increases in government spending in the health and education sectors in 2012–2013, national financial investment is still limited, with education accounting for 4.9 percent and health only 3 percent of the current budget. The United Nations is working together with the Government to increase the priority given to these sectors in order to close the gap in basic social services, particularly among regions and different ethnic groups.

32. Urgent structural reforms in the health and education sectors are required not only for expanding systems, but also for providing the quality of service required to build necessary human capital for poverty reduction. The United Nations is working with relevant ministries in support of National Strategic Plans and to improve the collection, analysis, dissemination and utilization of data at the township level. It will be important that the United Nations system work towards strengthening government capacity to deliver quality services, including through enhancing relevant institutional leadership and managerial systems.

33. The delegation visited a number of health clinics and non-formal education sites in the central dry zone and in southern Shan State. It was evident that there was a need for ongoing support of such projects at the local level. Non-formal education was seen as instrumental in providing opportunities for children who have dropped out or who for diverse reasons – including poverty, migration or social conflict – never attended school. Such a model should be expanded to avoid a further decline in literacy rates.

34. UNFPA and UNICEF were often supporting work in the same clinics; however, this was not always the case, and it was clear that there was little joint planning or programming under way across agencies, including at the national government level.

35. The United Nations is a key participant in the Education Thematic Working Group (ETWG), which is the main coordination mechanism bringing together government, multilateral organizations and international and local NGOs. The ETWG plays a critical role in allowing for strategic policy dialogue and advocacy for more equitable access to education. Government representatives told the delegation that they appreciated the efficient collaboration of the United Nations system, particularly UNICEF, in this sector. Such a coordination mechanism could be replicated across other sectors, particularly health. Coordination between donors and the United Nations in the education sector also appeared relatively sound, with potential lessons for other sectors.

36. Despite some progress towards achievement of the health-related MDGs, there remain some substantial challenges still to be addressed, particularly with regard to reducing neonatal and maternal mortality and maternal and child malnutrition, meeting the reproductive health needs, particularly of youth and adolescents, and increasing access to clean water and proper sanitation. High HIV prevalence rates, particularly among pregnant women and at-risk groups, also present a major challenge. There is a need for increased joint programming across United Nations agencies to address these issues, building on work already under way, including by the Joint United Nations Team on HIV/AIDS.

37. The education and health sectors remain largely dependent on donor funding, particularly through the Education and 3MDG Funds, managed by UNICEF and UNOPS, respectively. There is a need to move away from a reliance on donor funding in these sectors, in order not to undermine the long-term sustainability of social services. Low public spending in the health sector has also led to a fragile national health structure and more than 80 percent of total health spending coming from out-of-pocket payments.

38. Following the 2012 national conference on development policy options, the Government of Myanmar held the country's first conference on social protection. This conference was an opportunity to raise awareness among policymakers on the importance of building social protection systems, which are not strong in Myanmar, to mitigate the impact of poverty on families and enhance development outcomes for children. The delegation saw room for further work for the United Nations, together with relevant ministries, to influence legislation and policymaking to help operationalize the building blocks agreed upon at the

conference, in support of the establishment of a nationwide social protection system.

### **Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change**

39. Like many other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Myanmar is exposed and vulnerable to multiple natural hazards on a frequent and increasing basis. Likewise, climate change is impacting the biodiversity, habitat and natural resources of Myanmar, while also being linked to increasing frequency of disasters and extreme weather events. Following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, progress has been made on the formulation of policy documents and action plans such as the Myanmar Action Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction and the Standing Order on Disaster Management. Plans such as the National Sustainable Development Strategy and the National Adaptation Plan of Action are also being developed with a view to putting in place the institutional arrangements and frameworks for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

40. The United Nations Strategic Framework for Myanmar includes outcomes on disaster risk reduction and climate change to be supported by the UNCT at three levels: the national/policy level; the institutional/systems level; and the community level. UNDP's contribution to these three outcomes has, in the past, been limited by the organization's restricted mandate in Myanmar; however, the organization's new country programme includes an enhanced focus on this area, including policy advice at the national and sub-national levels. A thematic working group on these issues is also chaired by UNDP and ActionAid.

41. The delegation saw or heard little about this focus area on the visit, and it appears as though it requires additional attention from the United Nations. Disaster risk reduction should be an integral component of all United Nations programmes in Myanmar. It was unclear from the visit the extent to which disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation/adaptation had been mainstreamed across government development strategies and plans, or to what extent the various post-Nargis policies had been implemented by the government, including in recent disasters such as the November 2012 Shwebo earthquake. The expected increase in frequency and magnitude of hazardous natural events and their potential impact on development investments make these issues of particular relevance to the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development.

### **Good Governance and Strengthened Democratic and Human Rights Institutions**

42. Throughout the visit, the Government of Myanmar emphasized a desire to introduce democracy as well as the work that still needs to be done. This ambitious agenda includes further democratic reforms, peacebuilding, rebuilding the economy and ensuring the rule of law, as well as respecting ethnic diversity and equality. The changes are real but the challenges are complex and numerous, including weak institutional and technical capacity for policy formulation and implementation.

43. The Government's Framework for Economic and Social Reforms speaks to the importance of strengthening "good governance and clean government". The UNCT seeks to promote good governance and aims to deliver positive and sustained interventions to improve inclusive and equitable governance for both growth and poverty reduction, including proposing a number of actions with regard to public administrative reform, information access and transparency, control of corruption, rule of law and participation.

44. Furthermore, the Nay Pyi Taw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation highlights Government's commitment to "develop a culture of democratic practices that recognizes human rights and empowers citizens through participatory processes", to deepen consultation on development priorities and

plans across all levels of government, to engage strongly with civil society in participatory approaches, including providing greater voice to women, minorities and marginalized people, to strengthen the rule of law and improve access to justice, and to enhance the transparency and effectiveness of government programmes.

45. The United Nations Strategic Framework identifies the following four priority outcomes in this area: consistency between national legal frameworks and policies with ratified international treaties, standards and norms; equal access to social protection for vulnerable groups; strengthening of national statistical systems; and effective public participation in public policy decision-making and implementation for the realization of human rights and the MDGs.

46. Several United Nations agencies are involved in supporting these outcomes, including the International Labour Organization, UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF. UNDP works closely with national stakeholders on justice sector reform and parliamentary support.

47. Maintaining momentum for further reform in this strategic priority area, including through a sectoral approach and through strong alignment with national development priorities, is seen as crucial. At the same time, the UNCT and individual agencies must stay focused on their comparative advantages and be able to determine what they will and will not do and carefully assess the risk of overburdening the government with too many programmes and initiatives. Close coordination with international financial institutions on administrative reform and good governance is seen as crucial.

### **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment**

48. Myanmar is a state party to the CEDAW. As part of its commitment to economic and social reform, the Government of Myanmar is enhancing its focus on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, and has designated the Department of Social Welfare under the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement to be its gender focal point. Moreover, the Government is preparing its fourth and fifth combined CEDAW reports to be submitted in August 2014, and is finalizing its first national strategic plan for the advancement of women (2012–2021), mainly based on the Beijing Platform for Action. There has also been a growing number of civil society organizations working for women's empowerment.

49. Recently, United Nations Women Regional Office in Bangkok, together with the United Nations Gender Theme Group chaired by UNFPA, has been supporting analysis and building an evidence base, as well as undertaking limited awareness raising and capacity-building projects. Despite this, United Nations policy support to the formulation of this strategic plan has been limited. There is also a weak institutional support from United Nations to civil society, particularly the Gender Equality Network. Evidently, there is currently limited gender capacity across different ministries and levels of government. It is important that women's rights and empowerment be carefully considered in the context of all constitutional, legal, budgetary and administrative reforms currently under way.

50. Moreover, UN-Women currently does not have a country office or officer based in Myanmar and UNFPA chairs the UNCT Gender Theme Group. Myanmar is one of the three remaining LDCs in the Asia-Pacific region not covered by any form of UN-Women programme or project office – instead, limited programmes of support are being delivered from the regional office in Bangkok. The delegation expects it to be difficult for UN-Women to meaningfully influence the national reform process in Myanmar or effectively assist in the coordination of gender work across the UNCT as a non-resident agency.

51. The delegation also assessed there to be an insufficient focus on gender and women's empowerment outcomes in the 2012–2015 United Nations Strategic Framework, and limited action being taken to mainstream such work across the development and humanitarian programmes of the UNCT. Therefore, there is need for more joint programming and coordinated approaches in this area, although there are some recent welcome developments. UN-Women and the gender thematic working group chaired by UNFPA are currently preparing a gender situation analysis to support roll-out of the national strategic plan for the advancement of women, and UN-Women will soon place a gender adviser in the RC's office.

### **Humanitarian Operations and Support to Peacebuilding**

52. Sixty years of conflict in Myanmar, particularly in the border regions, as well as a particular vulnerability to natural hazards has led to persistent and acute humanitarian needs in the country. United Nations and other humanitarian actors were able to obtain increased access and strengthen humanitarian coordination mechanisms following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which devastated the Ayeyarwady basin. Since 2011, the Government's reforms have increased the possibility of, and space for, building sustainable peace, and ceasefires have been agreed between the Government and 10 of the 11 active armed groups in the country, including in Chin, Shan and Kayah States. Several bilateral donors and the United Nations are providing logistical and technical support to the newly established Myanmar Peace Centre, which coordinates all peace initiatives and aims to become a "one-stop service centre" for donor governments and international organizations to support the peace processes through future development cooperation.

53. Despite signs of progress towards peace in many areas of the country, serious humanitarian needs remain, particularly in two areas of the country, Kachin and Rakhine States, where conflict continues and large numbers of people have been internally displaced. Additionally, there are between 300,000 and 400,000 Myanmar refugees and unregistered asylum seekers remaining in camps and shelters in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Thailand, as a legacy of years of conflict.

54. The delegation was informed that ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and its allies had created a severe humanitarian crisis in Kachin State and northern Shan State, including displacement, damage of infrastructure and loss of lives and livelihoods. While violence had reduced since peace negotiations had resumed in February, a significant number of people continued to be displaced, with the total number of registered internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kachin and northern Shan reaching over 83,000, including 56 percent in areas beyond the Government's control. The delegation noted concerns by the United Nations and other actors regarding the lack of safe and unimpeded access of humanitarian actors to all IDP locations, particularly ahead of the monsoon season due to begin in May.

55. The delegation visited Rakhine State, the second poorest region in the country and where over 120,000 people were displaced by inter-communal violence in 2012. Many houses were burned and several villages totally destroyed, mostly belonging to the Muslim population who comprise the majority of the displaced population. Eight months on, tensions were still high. Due to the security situation, the Government had separated the Muslim and Buddhist populations, with limited freedom of movement for the Muslim population.

56. The delegation visited six IDP camps and observed varying conditions, with the worst conditions evident in the most remote camps such as Ngwe Chaung. The delegation noted insufficient food, clean water, hygiene, basic healthcare and clothing. The severe restrictions of movement of IDPs had resulted in no or very limited access to livelihood activities and social services such as health and

education. Addressing inappropriate shelter was highlighted as a particularly urgent issue, as the rains due in May would flood several camp sites. United Nations and other partners were advocating with the Government for a need to relocate certain camps in order to avert tragedy.

57. When the Rakhine crisis first began in 2012, the United Nations humanitarian system responded quickly, in collaboration with government and international humanitarian actors, to provide food, water and basic services to the affected population. The delegation observed that United Nations agencies were playing an instrumental role in the camps; however, there remained a tendency to work in silos, allowing duplication and gaps to occur. There were ongoing challenges to humanitarian coordination, with the cluster system yet to be fully utilized in country. In addition, organizations such as UNDP were doing purely humanitarian work in some camps. If the humanitarian situation is to continue, some United Nations agencies may have to clarify some roles and assistance.

58. In meetings with different authorities in Nay Pyi Taw, the United Nations was challenged to do more in Rakhine State. Based on the delegation's observations, the issue of sustainable development assistance from the United Nations needs to be carefully addressed, as this needs to go hand in hand with a political solution addressing the root causes of the conflict. If the United Nations is to scale up assistance, there is a need to look closer at additional resources and competencies that might be needed to complement the present resources focused on humanitarian assistance.

59. Overall, the delegation noted the importance of the Rakhine situation being urgently addressed through trust-building, communications and reconciliation measures. The delegation was informed of a committee that was to deliver a report with recommendations in the near future.

60. Looking forward, the delegation noted the imperative to avoid a protracted IDP situation and to combine a short-term humanitarian approach with timely interventions towards a sustainable political situation to the conflict in the medium to long term leading to development. The delegation stressed the importance of the United Nations in working under the leadership of the Government at the national and sub-national levels, and together with all actors and stakeholders in order to develop comprehensive strategies for a long-term approach that promotes peace, addresses the drivers of the conflict and establishes a sustainable transition phase towards development. The delegation noted the importance, too, of urgent action to ensure that such inter-communal violence did not spread to other regions of the country, as unfortunately occurred just two days after the end of the field visit, in Meikhtila, Mandalay Region.

## **V. Key Findings**

61. Overall, the delegation concluded that the UNCT in Myanmar was highly committed to building an increasingly positive and fluid dialogue with the Government at all levels and supporting the country in a time of great transition. The UNCT has recognized the urgent need for repositioning of the United Nations system in Myanmar in order to fully align with the opportunities provided by the Government's reform processes. The delegation recognized the complex environment in which the UNCT operates not just because of the political transition under way, but also because of the various simultaneous development and humanitarian challenges and contexts in different parts of the country. The delegation appreciated the efforts of the UNCT to meet the broad demands and expectations upon them in this crucial time, and commends the work of those staff working tirelessly, particularly those in areas of conflict and unrest.

62. Due to the previous restrictions on some UNCT members, the principles and mechanisms for close coordination and joint programming among agencies are still in their early stages, and more work is needed to improve and strengthen UNCT coordination, as well as coordination with government and other development and humanitarian partners. In this process, it is clear that the Government should take the lead for its own development while, at the same time, the role of the UNCT in supporting national ownership is critical.

63. Looking forward, and amidst a broad range of development issues, the delegation identified certain areas as needing particular priority attention by the United Nations in Myanmar. First and foremost, there is an urgent need for ongoing support to the Government in taking adequate and timely action to protect human dignity and avoid the risk of a protracted IDP crisis, especially in Rakhine State. Second, it is imperative that the UNCT scale up its assistance to the Government of Myanmar to achieve its poverty reduction goals. The lack of reliable socio-economic data has hampered the ability of the Government and the United Nations to respond effectively to development challenges. The 2014 census – the first in the country in 30 years – is being carried out with close collaboration between the Government and UNFPA, and offers a critical opportunity for the United Nations to support the Government to bridge this gap. It is imperative that the financial needs for the census be met as soon as possible. Third, it will be necessary for the country team to work together towards a common framework that aligns with the next five-year government development plan, due to begin in 2016.

## **VI. Recommendations**

64. On the basis of this mission, the following recommendations are presented to the UNCT in Myanmar, and to the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP, with a view to informing and enriching their work in the field and future Executive Board deliberations.

- a) The UNCT in Myanmar should continue to deepen its engagement with the Government in the country's reform process, ensuring a programme of strategic and well-coordinated support.
- b) Noting the Government's goals to reduce poverty from 26 to 15 percent by 2015 and to graduate from the list of least developed countries, the United Nations should proactively assist the Government in the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction strategies, drawing on the policy areas outlined in the Istanbul Programme of Action for LDCs and in line with the QCPR.
- c) In addition to poverty eradication, the United Nations should also continue its support to the Government in the areas of promoting good governance, democracy and rule of law.
- d) The UNCT should undertake a joint planning process, in full consultation with the Government, in order to prepare for a full UNDAF to commence in 2016 following the completion of the current Strategic Framework. Guidance and options should be given to the Government with regard to moving towards a more harmonized United Nations approach in support of national development priorities, including the principles and elements of the Delivering as One approach.
- e) While recognizing the existing coordination and dialogue under way within the UNCT, the delegation recommends that more be done to coordinate the selection of field project sites and expand joint

programming among United Nations agencies, as well as to strengthen humanitarian coordination.

- f) In order to enhance partnership with the Government, and to preserve the important legitimacy of the United Nations system in Myanmar, the UNCT should look to further strengthen channels of communication and collaboration with the Government and parliaments, including ensuring visibility and understanding of the work of the United Nations in the country and to keep them informed about the latest development programmes and plans of action. Such efforts should include a deeper engagement at the state/regional level of government, particularly as the decentralization process continues. Sector working groups should be expanded to include government involvement.
- g) The United Nations should also continue to increase its technical assistance and capacity development to the Myanmar Government, particularly to mobilize national resources for development and increase government ownership over programmes and projects. Building capacity of the Government's human resources is particularly important.
- h) Further capacity can be developed at the sub-national level by working with local authorities and seeking to enhance their involvement in and ownership of the development process. The United Nations should also continue to expand its collaboration with other stakeholders such as NGOs, civil society and the private sector in order to build capacity among such institutions.
- i) The UNCT should continue to strategically engage in development projects at the community level and promote community participation, particularly in those projects that contribute to skill development, empowerment of women and job creation. Any transition away from such projects should ensure their sustainability, including through empowering communities to continue their operations.
- j) Recognizing the very close linkages between development, peacebuilding and humanitarian relief, the delegation recommends the United Nations prioritize support to the Myanmar Government's efforts towards inclusive peace and reconciliation, including for people affected by conflict in Rakhine and other border areas. As the United Nations should focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, there are areas where the United Nations might need to include more traditional assistance in building up service delivery. Furthermore, the UNCT should ensure that all humanitarian assistance and development cooperation is impartial and conflict-sensitive, and does not exacerbate tensions. Humanitarian assistance, especially health care, should be strengthened to ensure consistent coverage of all IDP camps.
- k) The United Nations, in cooperation with other partners, should assist the Government in creating an enabling environment for increased income generation and inclusive growth. One initiative could be to increase support to sustainable agricultural development of small- and medium-size farmers to help them improve productivity and profitability.
- l) In general, the United Nations should avoid establishing large-scale programmes of traditional service delivery and should advocate for the Government to increase its budgetary resources to social sectors



such as health and education and thereby to strengthen government capacity. There is a need for an effective coordination mechanism in the health sector, with positive lessons to be learned from the education sector.

- m) Gender equality and women's empowerment should be strengthened as a cross-cutting issue across the United Nations plans and programmes in Myanmar, including through full use of tools such as the System-wide Action Plan and the UNCT Performance Indicators for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (the "scorecard").
- n) So as to take full opportunity of the current context of reform in Myanmar, and ahead of the 2015 election, serious consideration should be given to establishing a programmatic presence for UN-Women in Myanmar as soon as possible, in order to effectively advocate with the Government for mainstreaming gender dimensions across all policies and legislation and for improving accountability for gender equality, in collaboration with UNCT members.
- o) The United Nations should look for ways to enhance integrated strategies for disaster risk reduction, building resilience and climate change adaptation and mitigation, including by mainstreaming such issues across all programmes and sectors, and providing direct policy advice and capacity development at all levels of government. Technical input and lessons learned should be incorporated from the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction based in Bangkok, and from other countries in the region that have already implemented such policies.
- p) Given that Myanmar has one of the highest maternal mortality ratio in the East and South-East Asia Region, the United Nations needs to assist the Government in national and local capacity-building, as well as resource mobilization, so as to reduce maternal mortality in the country. Family planning should be considered one of the most important means to reduce maternal mortality.
- q) In order to promote children's development, the United Nations should focus particular attention on developing the Government's capacity to improve education for children, investing in children's health and enhancing child protection mechanisms. For young people, education, vocational and skills training and employment opportunities should be a priority focus area.
- r) In order to capitalize on the knowledge, successful experience and lessons of the South, the UNCT should establish a task force to identify and facilitate South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation initiatives carried out by United Nations agencies in all regions, which could be useful in support of the development policies and priorities of the Government of Myanmar.
- s) Building on the success of the January 2013 Myanmar Development Cooperation Forum, the UNCT should continue to formalize structures for donor coordination, ensuring mechanisms that are broad, inclusive and led by the Government. Such mechanisms should be transparent and accountable to the Government. The United Nations can also play a key role in advocating for and mobilizing increased and effective official development assistance.
- t) As the development situation in Myanmar continues to evolve, the United Nations and development partners should be open to examining existing funding modalities to ensure their maximum

efficiency, effectiveness and value for money. Where appropriate, modalities for a United Nations exit strategy should be developed and implemented.

- u) Given the importance of maintaining quality local staff capacities, there is a need to consider the revision of local pay scales across all agencies.
- v) Improving national data and statistics, including strengthening government capacity for statistics, should be a priority for the UNCT. There is a need, in particular, for deeper analysis of the situation of ethnic minority communities, and to disaggregate data across such communities in order to get a full picture of the very different development challenges simultaneously facing Myanmar and address the needs of the most vulnerable populations. It is essential that the 2014 census be adequately funded and concluded in a timely manner.
- w) United Nations agencies should aim to harmonize logistics systems for the supply and distribution of commodities, and to harmonize other business practices, services and premises where possible, as outlined in the QCPR.
- x) Some site visit projects had technical issues, which required immediate attention for their successful completion. These were conveyed to the visiting delegation directly by project beneficiaries, and messages were passed on to the UNCT. The delegation recommends immediate attention be given to resolving these issues.

## **List of Acronyms Used in the Document**

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEDAW	Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
ETWG	Education Thematic Working Group
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
IDP	internally displaced person
LDC	least developed country
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	non-governmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
QCPR	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
RC	Resident Coordinator
UNCT	United Nations country team
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women